

Ask Rep. Steny H. Hoyer what Democrats need to do to win back control of the House next year, and his first response is a barely suppressed chuckle.

"We're getting such extraordinary help from the other side," he said. "It makes it a little bit easier."

After a decade out of power, Hoyer and his Democratic colleagues are indulging occasional bouts of schadenfreude as they watch Republicans deal with indictments on both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue, growing unease about the war in Iraq and the fiscal and political fallout from Hurricane Katrina.

But can House Democrats -- a diverse caucus with sometimes wildly divergent views -- hold together and parlay Republican missteps into a return to the majority?

With relatively few congressional districts considered competitive in 2006, Republicans hold a 29-seat advantage, and biennial Democratic predictions of gains have failed to materialize over the past several elections.

Hoyer -- Southern Maryland's congressman and the No. 2 Democrat in the House -- said he thinks this is the best chance in years.

He points to polls showing rising approval ratings for the party, even as the public's views of President Bush, and Congress overall, remain dismal.

"The significance of that is what people are doing is saying, 'I want an alternative,'" he said. "In effect, they'll fire the Republicans, just as they fired Democrats in 1994."

In 1994, Republicans, bolstered by a string of Democratic scandals and policy foibles, swept into the majority for the first time in more than 40 years.

Next year, Democrats hope to get back in power by painting Republicans as fiscally irresponsible, ethically challenged and out of touch.

How the election turns out depends on a number of factors, but one of them is how well Hoyer does his job.

He is now in his third year as minority whip, and along with Rep. Nancy Pelosi, the Democratic leader, must continue to hold the often fractious caucus together while recruiting Democratic candidates and helping espouse the party's policy message.

It is a difficult job in a party where fault lines are very close to the surface. He has drawn criticism from some on the left, who say he's too moderate to lead a liberal-dominated House caucus.

When the House passed a measure in April making it more difficult for individuals to declare bankruptcy -- legislation long coveted by the credit card industry -- 73 Democrats joined every Republican in supporting it. Hoyer was among them, prompting grumbling from some in his caucus, who said he was undermining Pelosi and other liberals.

Hoyer, who voted for the bill several times, said he supported it because bankruptcy should only be used as a last resort, and because he felt the legislation contained provisions that would allow consumers to be better informed about their credit cards.

MoveOn PAC, a liberal advocacy group, ran radio ads criticizing Hoyer, noting that he received more than \$300,000 from credit card companies.

Hoyer wound up sitting down with Pelosi and disgruntled lawmakers to smooth things over.

MoveOn's Washington director, Tom Matzzie, said that despite the disagreement, Hoyer is a person he wants in the Democrats' corner.

"I'd take Steny Hoyer 99 days out of 100, over even some of his colleagues," Matzzie said.

Hoyer faced another snag this year, when questions were raised about lawmakers' privately funded travel.

It turned out Hoyer had failed to properly disclose some of his own jaunts. He finally caught up in the spring -- filing 13 reports for trips dating back to 1997 -- and said the focus should be on who's paying for the travel, not whether the paperwork is up to date.

Hoyer, who turned 66 in June, earns high marks from colleagues and opponents for his professionalism as a politician.

Rep. Thomas M. Davis III, a Virginia Republican, said Hoyer is regarded as a straight shooter who can be counted on to negotiate in good faith.

Unlike Pelosi, whom Republicans never fail to refer to as "a San Francisco liberal," Hoyer is tougher to categorize.

Republicans "see him as a very formidable opponent -- more formidable, probably, than Pelosi," said Davis. "Steny would probably be a tougher guy to run against as the face of the House Democrats."

Hoyer's face has been seen recently by a lot of other Democrats across the country.

Part of his leadership job is to help recruit candidates and raise campaign funds, and he has

been to 33 congressional districts in 19 states this year -- including an expected swing through North Carolina tomorrow, where he will campaign for Heath Shuler, a former NFL quarterback challenging a Republican incumbent.

A widower with three grown daughters and a springer spaniel, Charlotte, who commutes from Mechanicsville to Washington with the congressman every day, Hoyer has spent half a lifetime in politics. He was elected to the Maryland Senate in 1966, at the age of 27, and has been a congressman for a quarter-century.

Hoyer's political action committee, AMERIPAC, is one of the vehicles he uses to maintain his party leadership position.

He has raised more than \$700,000 this year for his travels and to funnel contributions to fellow Democrats. Much of the money comes from special interests, including PACs advocating for the health care industry, organized labor and financial services companies, including firms that pushed for the bankruptcy legislation.

At his weekly news conferences, Hoyer is often on the attack, whether the target is Republican leader Tom DeLay, forced to relinquish his party position because of an indictment in his home state, or presidential adviser Karl Rove.

"This is not about Valerie Plame," Hoyer told reporters the other day, in discussing the CIA leak case and the indictment of I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby Jr., Vice President Dick Cheney's chief of staff. "This is about our national security, and the safety of every officer we send overseas."

He can also be a moderating voice. In many ways, Hoyer and Pelosi reflect the different wings of their party; his moderate district, which includes St. Mary's, Charles and Calvert counties, along with parts of Prince George's and Anne Arundel, has moved rightward in recent years.

"I think more than anyone in the House Democratic leadership, Steny has his finger on the pulsebeat of Main Street America," said Marshall Wittmann of the Progressive Policy Institute, an arm of the centrist Democratic Leadership Council.

"It takes two wings to fly," he said. "And I think that liberals are cognizant of that as well."

If the Democrats take back the House, Pelosi would step into the role of speaker, and Hoyer would become the party's floor leader.

If Republicans stay in control, there is speculation that the Democrats might replace Pelosi with Hoyer.

Hoyer and his vote-counting team have held Democrats together on several contentious measures this year, including pro-industry legislation aimed at fostering new oil refineries.

The vote was so close that Republicans had to hold it open for 40 minutes, well beyond the usual 15-minute voting period, to force enough Republicans, such as Rep. Wayne T. Gilchrest of Maryland, to switch their votes in favor of the measure, which was approved by two votes.

As he campaigns for other Democrats, Hoyer is also preparing his own pitch to voters. Despite Republican attempts to defeat him in an increasingly conservative district, he won re-election last fall with 69 percent of the vote and has raised more than \$700,000 for next year's campaign.

Hoyer is mindful of the fact that his constituents care more about having a congressman working for them in Washington than they do about having a party leader. He is the only Marylander on the Appropriations Committee and spends countless hours pushing for spending projects, big and small, for the state.

"The only reason I get to be a national leader is because I am supported at the local level," Hoyer said. "If you forget that, you become a former national leader -- and a former member of Congress."